

Questions and Answers

Regarding the Petitions to List the Sage-grouse

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has received a petition to list the eastern subspecies of the greater sage-grouse as endangered. The Service has found that the petition does not provide sufficient information showing that the species is distinct from other sage-grouse populations. Based on that finding, the Service concluded in a 90-day finding that the eastern grouse is not eligible for Federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

(For more information about the petition and listing process, click here:)

<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/>

Sage-grouse Information

What is the sage-grouse?

The sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is a large, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches in length and two feet tall, weighing from two to seven pounds. It has a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes and fleshy yellow combs over the eyes. Males are larger than females. In addition to the mottled brown, black and white plumage typical of the species, males sport a white ruff around their necks.

The sage-grouse is found from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet in elevation. It is an omnivore, eating soft plants (primarily sagebrush) and insects. One of the most interesting aspects about the greater sage-grouse is its nearly complete reliance on sagebrush. These birds cannot survive in areas where sagebrush no longer exists.

What is the range of the greater sage-grouse?

The historic range of the greater sage-grouse included Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Mexico, Arizona, and the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Greater sage-grouse are no longer found in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and British Columbia.

What is the difference between the western, eastern, and greater sage-grouse populations?

Although the eastern and western populations were recognized for several years as subspecies of the greater sage-grouse, recent genetic studies indicate that there is no difference between them. The Service, therefore, does not recognize the eastern and western populations as distinct from other sage-grouse populations and does not consider them listable entities. The greater sage-grouse population encompasses both the eastern and western populations. The Gunnison sage-

grouse is a separate species.

The Service has received several petitions to list the entire population of sage-grouse as endangered throughout its range and intends to address all outstanding greater sage-grouse petitions by the end of March 2004, subject to legal commitments, resource limitations, and competing priorities.

What is being done to conserve greater sage-grouse?

Concern about long-term declines in greater sage-grouse populations has prompted western State wildlife agencies and Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to engage in a variety of cooperative efforts aimed at conserving and managing sagebrush habitat for the benefit of greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush dependent species.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is coordinating preparation of a rangewide conservation assessment of the greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat, with strong cooperation from the Federal agencies. The assessment, scheduled for completion in May of 2004, will be a valuable source of information regarding greater sage-grouse ecology.

Western states within the current range of greater sage-grouse are developing conservation plans to address issues such as habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation, and to identify opportunities for habitat restoration and enhancement. The intent of these plans is to find and implement local solutions to conserve the greater sage-grouse.

Over the past five years, the Bureau of Land Management has worked with several western states on cooperative sage-grouse conservation projects and has established partnerships with communities throughout the West to take specific and proactive measures to conserve and increase sage-grouse habitat. These efforts were designed to head off continued loss of America's important sagebrush ecosystems, which support hundreds of plant and animal species, including sage-grouse.

Petition Information

The Institute for Wildlife Protection petitioned the Service to list eastern population of sage-grouse as endangered. The 90-day finding will appear in the January 6, 2004 *Federal Register* as part of a settlement agreement that the Service complete the finding by January 2, 2004.

Under the Endangered Species Act, a species, a subspecies, or a distinct population segment may be listed as threatened or endangered. In order to qualify a distinct population segment for listing, Service policy requires looking at factors such as isolation and significance to the rest of the species.

Currently, sage-grouse can be found in 11 states and two Canadian provinces. Western sage-grouse were first described in 1946, but the validity of separating eastern and western subspecies has since been questioned. A genetics study conducted recently on the two subspecies indicates that there is no difference between them. The greater sage-grouse population encompasses both the eastern and western populations. The Gunnison sage-grouse is a separate species.

Does this 90-day finding constitute a final decision not to list the sage-grouse?

No. The Service has reviewed several petitions to list the entire species, known as the greater sage-grouse – rather than just the eastern subspecies of the sage-grouse. There is one petition – which the Service received on Dec. 22 – that has not yet been reviewed. Because that petition may contain new scientific information, the Service must review it before acting on the other outstanding petitions. The Service expects to release a finding on these petitions in by the end of March 2004, subject to legal commitments, resource limitations, and competing priorities.

What information did the Service use to make a 90-day finding?

The Service examined the information contained in and referenced by the petition, along with information in its files.

What's Next?

If the Service completes its finding on the outstanding petitions it has to list the greater sage-grouse and finds that the petitions provide substantial biological information indicating that further review of the species' status is warranted, it will conduct a rangewide status review of the greater sage-grouse, requesting input from the States, other Federal agencies, and the public. The result of this review is known as a **12-month finding**

What is a 12-month finding?

A 12-month finding will be the Service's determination of whether the greater sage-grouse should be proposed for listing. It is based on the rangewide status review as well as all other available information.

What information will the Service use in its status review?

During a status review, the Service will solicit all available information on the species' status,

trends, and threats. The 12-month finding will be based on all available information including the additional information gathered during the public comment period.

State conservation assessments and management plans as well as other efforts related to greater sage-grouse conservation activities on Federal, Tribal, and private lands will be considered during this decision-making process.

What are the possible outcomes of the 12-month finding?

Based on the status review, the Service will make one of three possible determinations:

- 1) Listing the greater sage-grouse is not warranted, in which case no further action will be taken.
- 2) Listing the greater sage-grouse is warranted. In this case, the Service will publish a proposal to list, solicit independent, scientific peer review of the proposal, and seek input from the public. This information will be considered before a final decision is made about listing the species. Generally, there is a one-year period between the time a species is proposed and the final decision.
- 3) Listing is “warranted but precluded.” In this case, a proposal to list the greater sage-grouse will be deferred while the Service works on listing proposals for other species that are at greater risk. If a “warranted but precluded” determination is made, the species is added to the list of Candidate Species. A warranted but precluded finding requires subsequent annual reviews of the finding until such time as either a listing proposal is published, or a “not warranted” finding is made based on new information.

How do I get more information?

Information regarding the petitions to list the greater sage-grouse as well as the Service’s 90-day finding is available on the Service’s Web site at:

<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/>

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